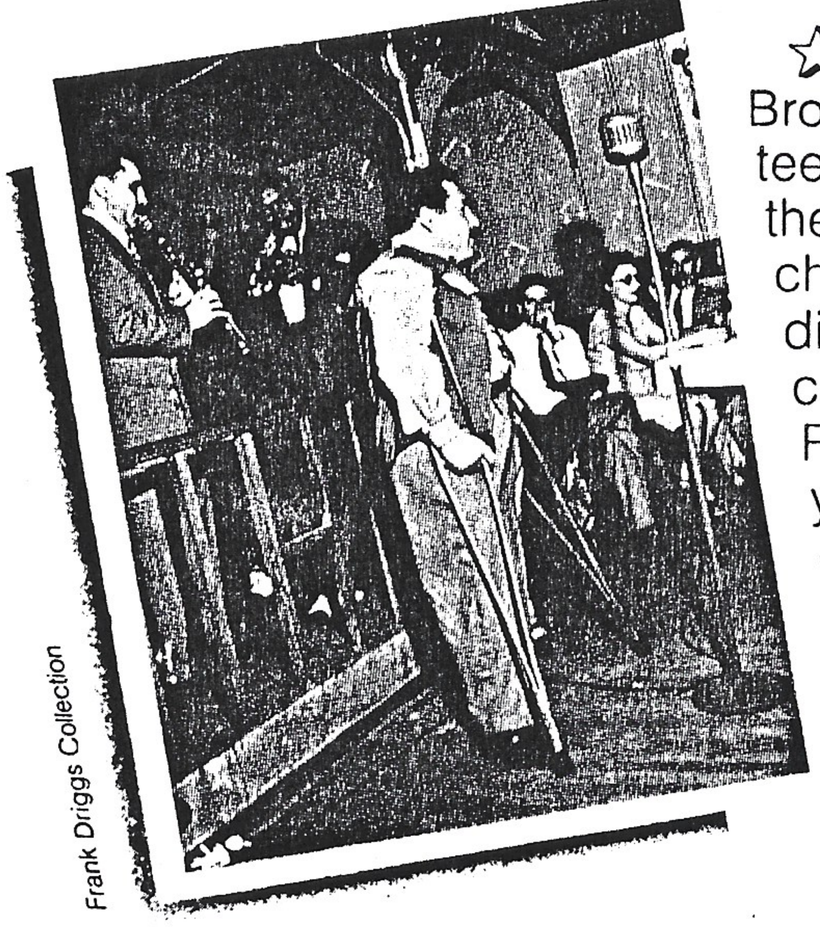
THE AUDIO INTERVIEW

DANNY McCUE

Doc Pomus



Frank Driggs Collection

☆ Born Jerome S. Felder in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn in 1925, Doc Pomus began his career while still in his teens, singing the blues in neighborhood clubs. In fact, it was the proximity of these clubs to his home that prompted him to change his name in an attempt to hide his doings from disapproving parents. ☆ In 1955, after a brief recording career that produced one minor hit—"Heartlessly," on Dawn Records—Pomus began a songwriting partnership with a young family friend, Mort Shuman. Together, they became one of the preeminent rock 'n' roll songwriting teams of the '50s and early '60s. Among their successes: "Marie's the Name (Of His Latest Flame)," "Little Sister," "Viva Las Vegas," and "Surrender," all penned for Elvis Presley, though the last-named song is actually an English translation of the 1911 Italian number "Torna a Sorrento"; The Drifters' "Save the Last Dance for Me," "This Magic Moment," and "Sweets for My Sweet"; The Coasters' "Young Blood," co-written by Pomus, Jerry Leiber, and Mike Stoller; Dion and The Belmonts' "Teenager in Love," and a host of other songs recorded by such lesser known talents as The Mystics ("Hushabye") and Terry Stafford ("Suspicion," a song originally written for Elvis).

☆ When collaborator Shuman moved to Paris in 1965, Pomus left songwriting for more than a decade. He then reemerged in the early '80s with a group of romantic urban vignettes penned for Willy DeVille's critically acclaimed album *Le Chat Bleu* and a continuing collaboration with another great talent, Mac Rebennack (Dr. John). Pomus won a songwriting Grammy for his work on B. B. King's 1981 LP, *There Must Be a Better World Somewhere*. The National Academy of Blues voted Pomus "Songwriter of the Year" in 1980 and '81, and in 1985, he was elected to the Board of Governors, New York Chapter, National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. ☆ In recent years, Pomus has been collaborating with Los Angeles-based songwriter Kenny Hirsch. Together, they penned the Easter Seals theme song "One More Time" (Pomus himself is a polio survivor); the song was recorded by Ray Charles. ☆ The interview that follows took place in Pomus' recording-filled apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

D.McC.

©David Gahr

the Doctor is in

I'd like to ask you about something that's been rumored for years. Did Phil Spector help produce "Save the Last Dance for Me"?

I don't think so. I know he played on one of the big Drifters hits like "Up on the Roof" or "Under the Boardwalk," but I don't know which one.

What did he play?

Great guitar player. He used to play on a lot of demos for me. He was a fine guitar player; in fact, that's what he was doing last night when he was here. Usually when he comes to New York, he'll rent a piano for my apartment, believe it or not. Recently the neighbors complained, so this time he brought a guitar.

Years ago, there's a great songwriter, Don Robinson, who was mostly a country songwriter. He was famous for being the originator of a certain kind of country piano that Floyd Kramer got all the credit for, but it was really Don Robinson's style of playing. He's still around, but he lives reclusively in California. Anyway, back when we were all involved in writing material for Presley, Robinson would come to town, and Spector was the first guy we'd mention to play rhythm guitar on the demos. He was a fine rhythm guitar player.

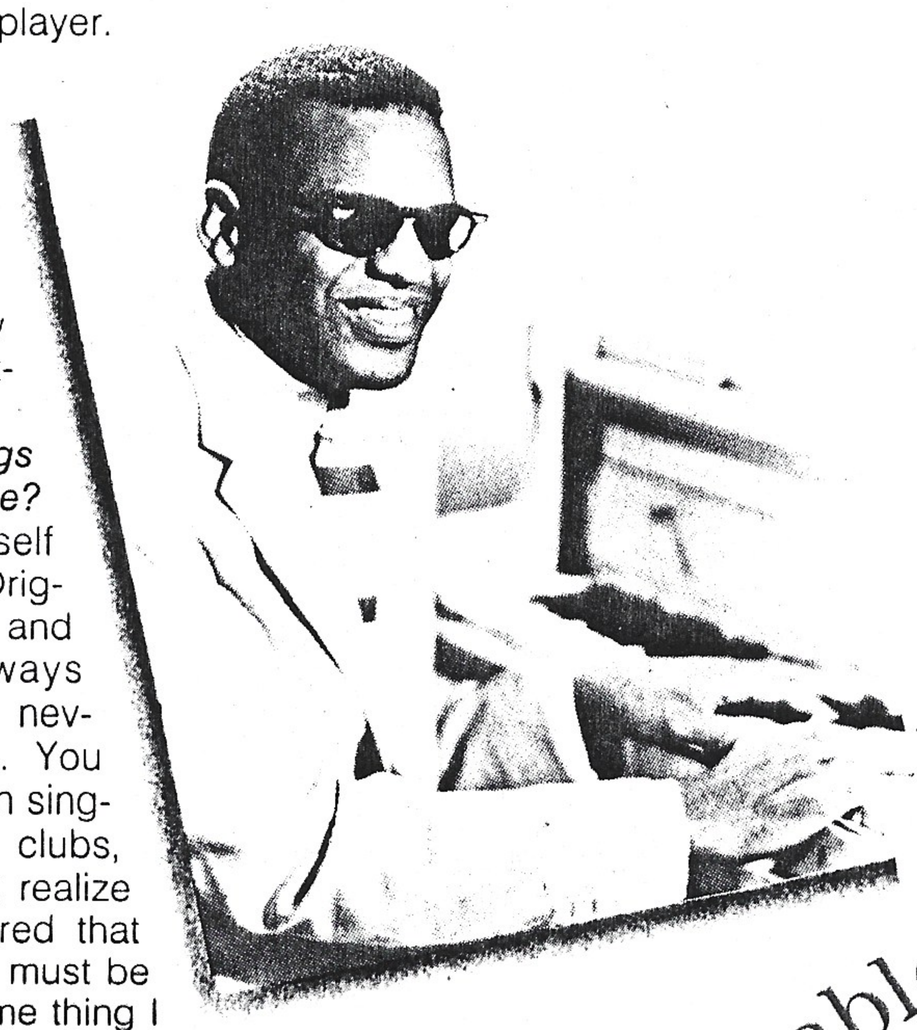
Most of the stuff he produced, he was the one who sketched a lot of those arrangements because he truly is an accomplished musician. I don't know why Spector's never gotten that kind of credit.

Which part of the songs would you generally write?

What I would call myself primarily is a lyricist. Originally, I was both singer and songwriter, and I always had a record out, but I never made much money. You see, I was a white person singing the blues in black clubs, and at the time, I didn't realize this was a rarity. I figured that in every major city there must be somebody doing the same thing I was doing. So all along, the main way I supported myself was by writing songs for people like Joe Turner, Ray Charles, LaVern Baker, Ruth Brown—not that I made a lot of money this way, but I made more money as a songwriter than I did as a singer. Then, about 33, 34 years ago, I decided I'd had it with singing because I just couldn't make enough money to live comfortably. By that I mean, so I wouldn't have to live in a hotel room sharing a bathroom with somebody. I just got tired of that way of living. So I thought the best way to live the way I wanted was to concentrate on writing songs. Then I figured the only way to really make money writing songs was to write a lot of them, and I realized the only way to do that was to have a partner.

So I met this young kid. He was hanging around with a cousin of mine, and he was the fellow who would always play the piano at parties—a very, very talented guy. So what I did was I locked him in a room with me for two years, and every song I wrote while he was in that room, I'd give him a piece of. As time progressed, I gave him

Ray Charles



I'm somebody who's able to

Photographs: Frank Driggs Collection

Ruth Brown

LaVern Baker

Joe Turner

to sit down and, if I have to, write lyrics on demand.

more and more of the song and he became more and more involved, so I made him a full partner. This was Mort Shuman. Before I wrote with Shuman, I had written a lot of rhythm and blues hits, but we had this enormous streak together. Until we became full partners, I was probably more a composer than a lyricist; then it switched around. I would say that now, with very few exceptions, I have very little to do with the melody on any song I write.

Do you see yourself as writing primarily for the audience or for the artist?

See, I think of myself as a songwriter functioning in an era of records. Years ago, people used to write songs for sheet music. But from the time I seriously started being a songwriter, what I would do is write a song that a particular artist coming up for a session could record. But always, in the back of my mind, I would try to write it, not according to the person's last record, but to the way the person could sing. That's why a lot of those songs keep getting rerecorded today. I was very involved in making records, as were most of my contemporaries, and I did this with Shuman for 10 or 12 years.

How was it that you older guys could write songs that, say, a 16-year-old girl could relate to?

What we would do is, we'd sit down and usually what we'd have was an idea for a song. It was always an idea that a grown-up could relate to—even with a song like "Teenager in Love." We both felt young people had just as many problems in love as older people, so a lot of the songs—for instance, "Save the Last Dance for Me"—might have language specifically geared toward 14-year-old kids, but the idea is one that adults could always relate to as well—you know, "as long as you're there at the end." I think that accounts for it; that is why people who grew up with that kind of music still relate to it a lot. Also, you've got to remember that I began as a songwriter for black artists, which in those days meant you wrote for an adult black audience. When writing for Joe Turner and Ray Charles, you weren't writing for 14-year-olds buying records, you were writing for adults in the nightclubs.

How about writing novelty songs like "Sweets for My Sweet," as opposed to straight songs?

Well, I'll tell you, what happens very often, at least to my kind of songwriter, is this: I'll have an idea for a song, and the idea might be the language of it rather than a story line. When I write a song with a Latin feel, I always try to figure out what my English lyrics would sound like if they were a translation. In "Save the Last Dance for Me," there's a line that goes, "and in her arms I'm going to be." Now, that's not the way somebody talks. "Sweets for my sweet, sugar for my honey"—again, it's almost like a translation into English from another language. Some ideas are symbolic, some are literal, and some are novelties. I had a big hit with a song I wrote with Leiber and Stoller called "Young Blood." Now, that's an expression that was used by a character who lived in my neighborhood. We called him Devil. I don't remember what his real name was, but he used to call all the younger guys youngbloods, and it just knocked me out. I had never heard it before, so I wrote a song around it.

Do the lyrics simply come to you out of thin air?

You know, that's very interesting. I once spent a day with Bob Dylan, and he told me he had always felt he was like an antenna. He doesn't even know where his words come from; it's like they were just floating around. In my case, I've always felt I have a tape recorder inside, and all of my song ideas are in there already. I don't even know how they got there, but they're in there. As a result, I'm one of those people who, when they have to, can sit down and write lyrics on demand. Any time I sit down with a paper and pencil,

The Coasters

Photographs: Frank Driggs Collection

I can come up with ideas that just seem to flow, I have no idea why.

A song will just flow, line by line?

If it's only a line, it'll lead to other things. Sometimes it might be like eight bars of a lyric. Sometimes there's a dummy melody to go with it. It's so weird with songs.

Do you find yourself having to do a lot of editing?

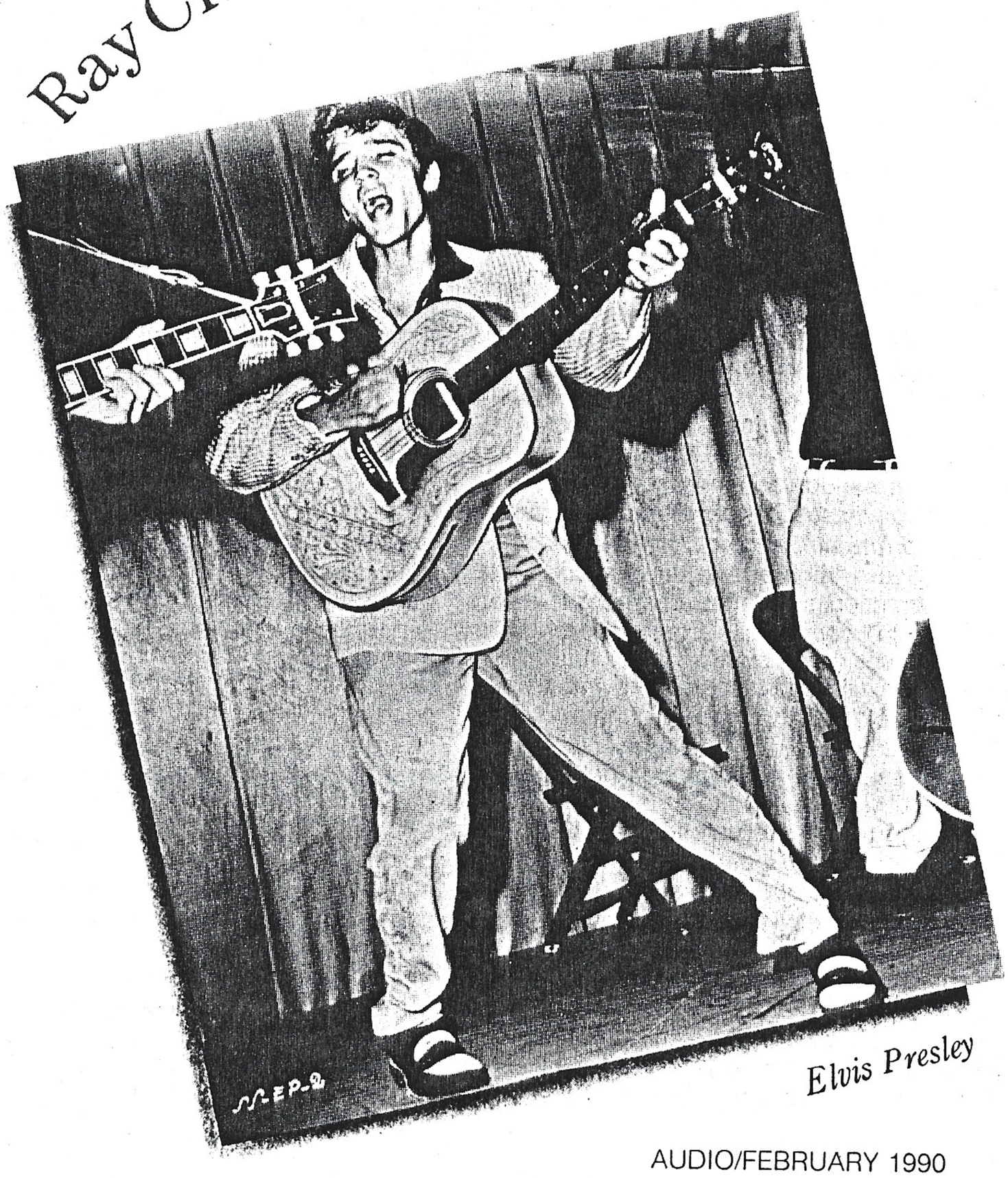
Very seldom. Lots of people torture themselves over a song, but I've found that my initial instincts are as good as anything I might come up with later. I give a lot of songwriting workshops, and what I've found is there are really two kinds of songs—what I call "internal" and "external." There are great, great songwriters who write externally: They're craftsmen who go over each section a hundred times and torture these songs. And then there are other guys who have some lyrics that are almost throwaways, and I really respect those people more and I'll tell you why: Because their work is much more real. I really admire a lot of the songs of Kris Kristofferson because I assure you—though I've never discussed it technically with him—that that's where he's at. There's nothing superficial about lines like, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose" or "I'm wearing my cleanest dirty shirt." These are unbelievably great lyrics, some of the best ever written, but I guarantee you, some of those were just throwaways for him.

You mentioned spending a day with Dylan. How did that come about?

My life is filled with strange experiences. I have a son who was visiting me years ago during one of his college breaks. We went next door to get some coffee, and as we were leaving, I put my answering machine on and said, "Watch, I'm going to miss a million-dollar call." When we come back, there's a message on my machine saying, "Bob Dylan wants you to call him at such and such a hotel," blah, blah, blah. And I thought Spector, who's a great practical joker, was having some fun with me. So I call up the hotel, go through the instructions left on the machine, and although I'd never met Dylan, when he answered the phone, I recognized his voice. It really was Dylan. He said he'd like to get together with me soon, and I couldn't figure out why, but he did seem to know all my songs. He said, "I know you wrote this song . . . and this song . . . and this song." He came over the next afternoon, and my lasting impression of him was that he was so painfully shy. To make a long story short, he told me of certain experiences, and we talked about things, but the bottom line was that he said he was having a little trouble coming up with a set of lyrics. So here was the poet of the 20th century, and he wants me to write lyrics to some melodies he wrote—what a strange fucking experience, you know? But what happened was, I think he came up with some things he was happy with on his own, and the idea of our writing together kind of fell apart. But what an interesting day I spent—an interesting day with Bob Dylan.

Although this is probably a pretty theoretical question, when you were writing during the late 1950s, were you con-

Ray Charles and Elvis could add s



Elvis Presley

dd something to a song I didn't see when I wrote it.

scious of trying to write not just a hit song, but a classic?

When you're under contract and the publisher is paying you money, they expect a hit. But now, I think in terms of writing good songs, and if it's commercially viable, that, to me, is a bonus. I don't sit down and try to write hits because I don't have that kind of drive for recognition.

Would you say you've been heavily influenced by other songwriters?

Let me put it this way. I always surrounded myself with people I felt were masters of their craft. Now, I'm not saying I did this consciously, but that's the way it turned out. I think my craft grew because writing rock 'n' roll tunes, to me, was only one kind of songwriting. I was known in that field because that's where I had the hits, but I think I'm a much better writer of a certain kind of blues song. I'm not Chuck Berry, and yet I can write a certain kind of song as good as you can write it. I don't want to sound egomaniacal, 'cause I really don't mean it that way at all. I think what you have to do in this world is understand your limitations. Once you figure that out, you can really do a lot. There are certain kinds of songs I just can't write. But what I can write, I write pretty well.

And I'm going to tell you something about Mort Shuman. What we used to do was, he used to go to Mexico quite often and come back with very complicated Mexican rhythms—he was a rhythmical genius—and it would be up to me to make them compatible with the American market. This process contributed to my growth considerably, and one of the songs that came about in that way was Elvis Presley's "Surrender."

Did you ever meet Elvis?

No, I never did. I was supposed to go to a session one time, but my brother got married unexpectedly, and that ended that. The closest I ever came was seeing him at a press conference. I was supposed to meet him, but the Colonel, who I had met a few times, wouldn't let me. I went to lunch afterwards and was very upset. I thought, "Here was my chance, and it's gone." Vernon Presley was at the next table, and we told him what happened. He tried to get hold of his son, but by then, Elvis had left—either for the place he was working or the airport. A year later, this guy calls me, a promoter or something, and says that Presley is coming to town and that he's arranged a meeting for us and I should write some material for him. So I sat down with this kid I was writing with at the time, and we started to write. After a couple of hours, we decided to take a break. I put the television on just as they were breaking into the regular programming to announce Presley had died.

Who would you say were the greatest interpreters of a Doc Pomus tune?

Ray Charles and Elvis Presley always added something to a song that I didn't see at the time I was writing it. And Leiber and Stoller productions—very often they'd put great things in, like on The Drifters' records.

We've been talking about the more successful instances in your career, but there must have been another side to the coin. Can you remember times when your songs were rejected by an artist?

Oh, many of the songs that Mort Shuman and I wrote were rejected a lot of times—Bobby Darin had rejected both "Marie's the Name (Of His Latest Flame)" and "Little Sister" before we brought them to Presley's attention.

What's your definition of a songwriter?

Mort and I, we considered ourselves songwriters because we put out many different kinds of songs. Today, I think the nature of being a songwriter has changed, because you don't have great singers anymore. There just aren't people like Sam Cooke, and I think that's because record companies want people who are disposable, who can easily be replaced. If Sam Cooke were around today, I think he'd have a hard time getting a record deal—if he had a couple of hit records and then one bombed, who's gonna replace him?